

Up on high



Wildlife photographer Martin Smith has worked in many exotic locations around the globe. But a whole new world of colour and texture opened up when, from a helicopter's bird's eye view, he discovered the wonders of the coastline of his native Norfolk. Charles Roberts talked to him.

**The shingle bank
at Salthouse.**

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To describe Martin Smith as an international wildlife photographer is merely a statement of fact. The words reveal nothing of the contagious enthusiasm he brings to his work, nor the loving care and awesome patience which goes into every frame.

Fortunately his pictures tell the story, whether he's questing for crocodiles in Madagascar; or seeking shots in a Texas desert of the curiously named little dickcissel bird; or walking with gorillas in Zaire ... or returning to his beloved Norfolk to indulge his lifelong love of English woods and tranquil waters.

Whatever the setting, he lives in the constant expectation of fresh surges of adrenalin as nature – or is it his personal guardian angel? – happily co-operates with him.

Like the day, for example, when beside a Norfolk pool a photo-shot chance in a million set itself up for him, before his very eyes: Three perky young kingfishers, sitting neatly in line on a notice board which proclaimed: "No Fishing".

Or more recently, while filming on the Somerset levels with Bill Oddie for his natural history TV series. Oddie and the crew were up with the dawn and by 5am were settled into a spot where wetlands gave way to the ridge of Glastonbury Tor, behind which the sun was rising.

Suddenly, over the ridge came a dark silhouette – a fox. He moved silently down the hillside, sniffing the air. A scent rewarded him. He paused, then with energy set to, to dig. A flotilla of crows came from nowhere to mob him. Gulls shrieked. Wetland birds rose up in alarm at the morning noise. The sun was still rising and the sky was alive.

But Charlie Fox was not to be intimidated. By now he'd dug a hole big enough to get his head in – which he did, to emerge triumphantly with a young rabbit in his jaws. One quick shake to kill it, and Charlie, his prize held firm, was away up the ridge, over which he disappeared the way he had come.

And every move of this little drama was "in the can", to the delight of cameraman and colleagues.

Luck? Or something a little stronger? "Sometimes you do wonder," admits Martin, with a wide grin of schoolboy exuberance. Then, more seriously, he concedes: "I am not a very spiritual guy myself, but when you are out there in the wilderness, and you are faced with the beauty of wildlife and great landscapes, that for me is my church."

No doubt similar echoes were in his mind on the day he went up in a microlight above North Norfolk's beaches, riding lively thermals which threw the tiny plane about like a leaf on the wind. It made photography impossible – but provided a stunning introduction to vistas of amazingly vivid colours, patterns and textures which left him astounded.

"It was spectacular, and I wanted to share it with other people."

He and his wife Pauline did a tour of galleries and restaurants showing pictures, and realised that while a lot of people were painting and photographing the coastline, in black and white, in sepia and in colour, there was no one doing aerial pictures.

"It was a case of organising a helicopter to go up there, to give me the images I wanted, a good depth of field, and the essential crisp Norfolk light on the coastline. When all this came together it was absolutely outstanding. The blues in the sea when you got the light right ... it could have been the Mediterranean."

The colours are undoubtedly spectacular, prompting the instant questions: Have the negatives been 'treated' in the lab? Or were enhancing filters used?

"The colours really are accurate and ►



**The
saltmarshes
at Wells.**



(Above left) The saltmarshes at Stiffkey. (Top right) Beach huts at Wells. (Bottom right) West Sand to East Hills.

untouched," Martin assures. "These pictures show genuinely what you see from up there."

The area he covered extends from Salthouse to Thornham, where the North Sea turns into the Wash.

"I love the pictures which look down directly from the helicopter. For example, my picture of the marshes at Stiffkey. It looks like the Russian tundra, with so many shapes and forms, created by creeks and pools which have been carved out by the tide."

The predominant colours are yellow and brown, and multi-shades of green and mustard, almost inviting you to reach down and touch.

There is a shot looking down onto the sandbanks of Blakeney Point, in which the dry sand is punctuated by tiny black shapes, with more small dark objects hazy in the sea. It takes a moment to realise that you are looking at scores of seals, basking in the sun, or leisurely swimming, after feeding in the Wash.

"You can see the sand marks where they have pulled themselves from the water up onto dry sand. There are both common and grey seals – though the common variety are not so common any

more."

One of Martin's favourite shots, which he simply calls "Sandbar", is a sandbank between Blakeney Point and Wells harbour. In the top left hand corner of the picture, in the far distance, there is a small dark strip which is woodland near Wells, called East Hills.

"Forget it is East Hills," says the cameraman, "and it could be anywhere in the world ... the sand left by the ebbing tide, stretching away for mile upon mile, the sun is shining, the tide is out, the sands surrounded by deep blue sea."

One image he wanted to capture was of Wells, seen from a completely different angle to the norm. The town is seen, bordered by marshland and creek on one side, and the rest by farmland. The meandering Stonemeal Creek forges through dark green marshes, in sharp contrast to wedges of bright golden cornfields on each landward side of the town.

Wells looks small, compact, as if it is bounded by a medieval wall.

Of a quite different character is Martin's study of Salthouse seawall – Wells is in the distance, Salthouse in the foreground, and Wells nature reserve

between the two. What we see is a long, low, straight stretch of sand and shingle, holding back a great expanse of astonishing blue sea, which is ceaselessly pushing against man's puny barrier.

"But will it still be there in ten years from now, as the sea advances step by step, constantly testing the defences?"

This much is sure: if the sea ever does break through, Martin Smith's dramatic and beautiful pictures will become an historical record. ■

Martin Smith's chosen camera is Japanese, a Bronica. He normally uses 100ASA Fuji film, medium format. He "pushes" the film, double rating it to 200ASA, so as to gain an extra stage in depth of field and fine grain. His folio of aerial pictures is on display through the summer at the Mermaid's Purse, a group of shops, gallery and restaurant in Staithe Street, Wells-next-Sea.

Martin Smith is a freelance photographer, available for specialist commissions. Telephone 01328 820660.



**Seals at
Blakeney
Point.**